English article on billingualism in Ireland and Northern Ireland

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The Leprechaun Language

Differing opinions on bilingualism on the Emerald Isle

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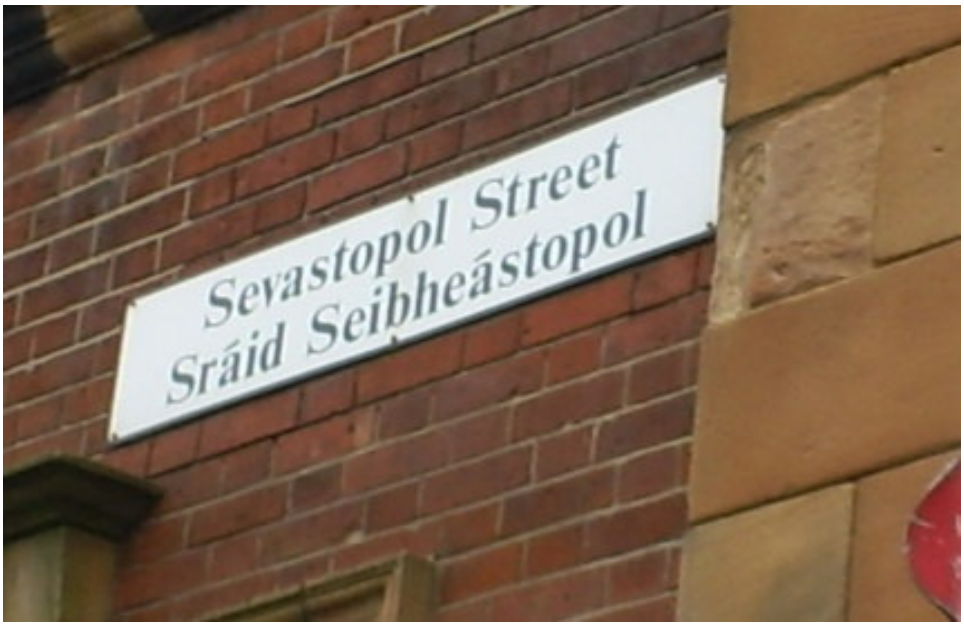


Even though research has proven that being able to express yourself in more than one language is in most cases a very useful skill for the rest of your life, multilingualism usually does not come about as a natural aspect within society. Take Ireland as an excellent example to this notion: for centuries there has been political friction, disguised as a battle between religions, as opposed to political beliefs and sociological convictions. Although the days of civil war and heavy bloodshed have long been gone, there are still many marks left from these days: obvious differences in language.

To find out these differences, I travelled to Ireland to interview people both from the Republic of Ireland, as well as people from Northern-Ireland, to see what is left of the old nationalism and to take a closer look on how language has been dragged into Ireland's dirty wars and how the language differences still exist today. Also, I would like to draw a portrait of how "outsiders", non-Irish, non-native speakers living in Ireland look at the English and Irish society that claim such a large influence wherever they go.

Proud to be Irish

I meet Declan O'Connor, a Republican and a true Dubliner, in a snug pub in Temple Bar, the famous area in the city centre which has the most pubs per square mile in the world, and when I ask him about his views on bilingualism in his mother country, I find out that he's got a thing or two to say about that. When I ask him about what the Irish (Gaelic) language means to him, he says: "The Irish language is part of our heritage and identity. It makes me feel proud to be Irish. It's part of what defines us as a nation and distinguishes us from being seen as British by other Europeans. Obviously I am fluent in both written and spoken English. As for Gaeilge, the Irish word for our national language, I would have a fair understanding of it. I wouldn't describe myself as being proficient in the language but I could hold a conversation using it."

When I ask him about how it affects his daily life, he shakes his head and says: "it doesn't really have an effect on my daily life. All of the Government Departments and the Civil Service do business in both Irish and English. I think if I were only able to speak Irish solely and not English I may find it difficult to communicate as not everyone is proficient in our native tongue. Also, the huge amount of immigrants here can hardly speak English, never mind Irish! So, yes it would be a challenge indeed."

Having a conversation and a pint in Dublin improved my understanding of the Irish multilangual situation

Growing popularity of Gaelic

I confront Declan with my doubts about whether there should be two languages in one society: isn't one language bound to be inferior to the other, and therefore eventually also superfluous? "I think it is a very good thing that both languages remain in our society. It would be a shame if Irish were to die a slow death. However, I don't think this will happen as the Irish language is going through something of a renaissance these past few years. There is huge affection and enthusiasm toward it, especially among the 'Celtic Tiger cubs', the generation that came after the generation that was responsible for a rapid economic growth in the 90s, also known as 'The Celtic Tiger'. Gaelscoileanna are flourishing and there are waiting lists if you wanted to send your child there. The Gaelscoileanna are schools in which the Irish language is used as their main language, as opposed to English, so as Irish is used as the language of communication, children learn to speak and write it fluently. It is extremely popular among Irish families living in the Republic of Ireland. I think the Irish language has, and continues to enrich and colour the English language."

Okay, so there are two different languages present in a society which consist of a relatively limited number of people (5-6 million people are living in the Republic of Ireland today. To put this in context: Ireland is approximately three times as large as The Netherlands). Do these languages affect one another internally, in your opinion? Is your use of English affected by our Irish skills, or vice versa? "Yes I think my English is completely affected by the Irish language. In fact many would say we don't speak English but Irish English or Hiberno-English. This is reflected in sentences containing Irish loan words such as 'amadán' (which means 'idiot'),

typically colloquial words such as 'scanger' (which means 'scum' or 'rough youngsters'), a word derives from the Irish language, and sometimes even the word order of sentences is influenced by the Irish language such as 'What are you after?' instead of 'what would you like to have?' and so forth. It could also work the other way around: Hiberno-English words can also stem from originally English words, but has become Hibernicized over the years: 'idiot' becomes 'eejit'."

Between culchies and jackeens

What is your attitude towards the regional varieties that are present in your country? Do you tend to have a different view on people from the countryside as opposed to city people? **"**People from outside Dublin tend to have an unhealthy suspicion and mistrust of us 'Dubs' it could well stem from an inferiority complex that they have, as they were traditionally seen as uncouth farming types whereas Dublin people were seen as sophisticated and streetwise. Dublin city people would jokingly refer to those from outside the 'big city' as 'culchies', 'boggers', 'bogtrotters' and 'muck savages'. The word 'culchie' derives from the Irish word 'coillte' which means 'woods'. It goes back to the time when the English only controlled the Dublin County region and the rest of the country would have been heavily forested. In return they refer to us as 'jackeens.' Rural folk must have long and bitter memories as this particular term of abuse refers to Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland when many misguided Dubliners lined Grafton Street and O'Connell Street waving little Union Jack flags; hence the term 'jackeen' which comes from the Irish word meaning 'little union jack.'

"The Queen's English is not cool, it's not fashionable and it's not in use in Ireland." *Declan O'Connor, Dublin.*

Many accents but no Queen's English

For a relatively small country such as Ireland there are a wealth of different accents, some which I myself find hard to decipher, most notably the Cork/Kerry accent and the Belfast accent. It's quite a phenomenon that every county has its own accent. I would say there are three or four types of accent in Dublin alone. Ireland is an amazing place in that respect."

Hiberno-English is officially a variety of the English Language. How do you feel about this, how do you feel about the 'purest' form of English, namely Received Pronunciation? "It's rarely used (if at all) in either Ireland or Britain. I see it as very cold and formal and unexpressive. It's also known as 'the Queen's English' and that's the thing: she's the only one who speaks that way. I think in decades to come it will be seen as we see Shakespearian language today. If I were to speak it around Dublin or anywhere else or to my friends I would be scorned at. Let's put it this way: it's not cool, it's not fashionable and it's not in use. As far as I'm aware the Queen of England is the only one who speaks it when she makes her annual speech on the BBC."

Towards bilinguality

So is Ireland truly bilingual, or does it stretch further than using Irish equivalents for English words and names in public places? Are they feigning bilingualism, and has the Irish language died a long time ago without anyone noticing or acknowledging this? "Maybe it is not as bilingual as, let's say, Belgium. But the use and popularity of Irish is increasing rapidly. Official estimates state there 540,000 speakers in the 26 Counties alone and another 100,000 in the 6

northern counties. The Civil Service operates bilingually as do all the Government Departments. Also, for example, if you want to be a Primary School Teacher it is compulsory that you are fluent in Irish. There are also many Gaeltacht regions in Ireland; predominantly in Cork, Kerry, Waterford, Galway and Donegal. The Irish language is the first, everyday language there. We also have a TV station (Telifis na Gaeltachta) and radio stations that are solely broadcast through Irish."

The Irish government is making visible contributions to support bilingualism in Declan's country: "There is a Government Department that looks after and supports Gaeltacht affairs, in other words: that supports Gaelic Irish affairs. They also subsidized the setting up of the national Irish language TV station which went on air in 1993 and has been a great success." The authorities, however, are not the only one who is supposed to contribute to maintaining a bit of Ireland's heritage: the people play a vast role in the process as well. Declan is very willing to invest actively in the future of the Irish language: "I would certainly enrol my children in a Gaelscoileanna and yes, raise them bilingually. I think it would help me improve my Irish if my fami ly were speaking it around the house. As for contributions I make, I listen to Radio na Gaeltachta frequently and I speak Irish when I can."

"All of the Government Departments and the Civil Service do business in both Irish and English." *Declan O'Connor, Dublin.*

Thinking about the future

Finally, I ask him about how he feels about the future of the Irish language: is he optimistic about its continuing existence, or does he think it will eventually vanish entirely after all? "I am very optimistic about the future of the Irish language. I think the language would have died long ago if there was no future for it. And as I stated previously it is presently enjoying somewhat of a renaissance all over the island of Ireland, especially among the younger generation."

On my way back, I cross St. Stephen's Green, where I get into a conversation with another Dubliner. As we are talking about bilingualism in Ireland, he explains to me that the Irish language is nowadays mainly used by the elite in the Fair City: "everyone in Ireland can speak English, but most people have not learnt more than elementary skills when they were children. I myself have developed a better proficiency in the Irish language, but I don't think this applies to the majority of the Irish people".

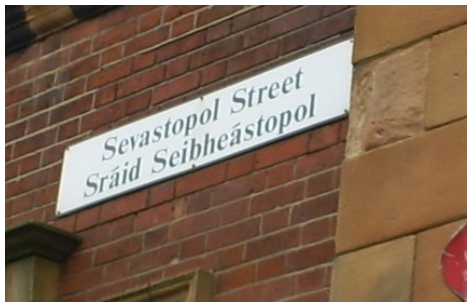
Nollaig Shona Duit or Happy Christmas to you

Travelling to Belfast

Having read quite a bit on the turbulent Irish history, though knowing that the city of Belfast or other places on both the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland hasn't been bombed out of political reasons by angry civilians or IRA-members for quite a while now, I still felt a little nervous about travelling up to Belfast. I got on the bus in Busáras, the central bus terminal in Dublin, and I noticed that I have become very comfortable about using Irish words and terms and also to all the bilingual street signs

and Christmas decorations on the street saying “Nollaig Shona Duit”, which means “Happy Christmas to you”. As we passed Drogheda and crossed country Louth, I knew we were getting closer to the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and it was getting dark when we crossed it. What we entered was quite a grey area, language-wise: there was some Irish that was used in public places, but the more we moved up, the more Irish words started to lose ground, until we finally reached Newry, and practically all bilingual street signs had disappeared. Typically British shops such as Sainsbury’s were there, not Dunnes, which is a typically Irish warehouse. This was rather confusing, as the countryside and the appearance of the country were quite similar to that of the Republic. As soon as I arrived in Belfast, it was like I had entered a northern town in Great Britain: absolutely no Irish was used whatsoever. The people even dressed the same, looked the same and ate the same dishes as the British.

Language as a statement



Bilingual street sign, Falls Road. Belfast

So in order to find out where Irish was still used, I went to what once were the most dangerous streets in Belfast: the loyalist, Protestant Shankill Road, and the nationalist, Catholic Falls Road. And hey presto: there were still no Irish words to be found in the Shankill area, whereas there was plenty of Irish to be found in Falls Road, although I very much doubt the majority of them could actually speak Gaelic Irish! It was very interesting to see how language was still used here to show the rest of the world which “side” you had taken: either the loyalist or the nationalist side, and how language could be seen as offensive by some communities within this part of the country. It would be absolutely unthinkable to add the Irish equivalent of place names, this would lead to a lot of friction among the northern-Irish community. Writing “siopa” instead of “shop” or signing memorials or murals with texts that are written in Irish is used as a way to rebel against the status quo: although the Irish language is pretty much banned out of society entirely in northern-Ireland, some seem to be rather persistent in defending their Irish, nationalist identity: regardless of whether it would cost them their lives. As I expected, bilingual signs started to appear along Falls Road here and there as well.

The Troubles

I had become rather curious about the viewpoint of northern-Irish people on this particular subject, so in the Crown and Liquor Saloon, on Great Victoria street, opposite “Europe’s Most Bombed Hotel”: the Europa Hotel, I got into a conversation with Terry McGrath from Ballymurphy, east-Belfast. This 27-year old has been living in Northern Ireland all his life, and even experienced the final years of what was called “The Troubles” as a youngster, namely the political friction between those who were loyal to the British Crown, and ‘fenian’ rebels who were fighting for a united Ireland. When I ask him what the Irish language means to him, he says “my father was a nationalist, and my mother was a loyalist, which occasionally led to a bit of trouble. He owns a fair vocabulary of Irish, but he hardly ever used it in the house. I went to a Catholic school and there we were taught some Irish, but to be honest I can’t remember a lot of it, as it is of no use whatsoever today: people don’t speak Irish amongst each other on the

"To me, the Irish language means trouble, and has become redundant."
Terry McGrath, Belfast

streets, and if you are, you're seen as a fervent Republican. This part of Ireland has Anglicised extensively. To me, the Irish language means trouble, and has become redundant in Northern-Ireland." My impression is that the Irish is not a dying language in Northern-Ireland: it seems that it already died along with the era of nationalist figures such as Bobby Sands and other Catholic, patriotic rebels. "If the Irish language is supposed to be restored on the basis of a faint endeavour to sustain the Irish language within society, such as sticking bilingual street names on the walls, it will not stand a chance."

Good craic

As we are talking about this in the pub, I can hear the others chatting to one another in a strong Belfast accent. This accent of the people who live in Northern-Ireland is a strange hybrid of the Irish accent that can be found throughout the Republic and a distinct influence of the Scottish accent. This sometimes leads to confusion, and as I need to concentrate very hard on what is said as it is often very difficult to make out what they are actually saying. When I ask Terry if "Irishisms" are used in Northern-Ireland as much as in the Republic, he has to think for a couple of seconds before he says: "I can tell that you are used to Dublin people, as the examples you give are typical for Dublin slang. But if you mean expressions that are used a lot here and are different from Standard English, then there are of course a fair amount of typically northern-Irish phrases. For example: we say 'what about ye', when we mean 'how are you?', and we use the Irish word 'craic' to express that we are having a good time: 'That club was such good craic!'"

Northern Ireland is tired of violence

A Dutch girl in Dublin

In Bray, co. Dublin, I meet Nicolien, a Dutch girl who used to live in Ireland for over four years, and she tells me she has become friends with many Irish people, as well as with immigrants such as Polish workers who came to Ireland before the recession. She tells me that she has a poor understanding of the Irish language, even after living in Co. Clare (a rural area on the west-coast of Ireland, quite near the Gaeltacht-areas) and Co. Dublin for quite a long period of time. "It was never practical for me to use the Irish language, as all Irish people speak and understand English. I don't know a lot about the history of Ireland and what importance the language plays to the Irish from a historical perspective, and I personally don't feel the urge or the need to learn more about the Irish language. Having an Irish accent whilst speaking English is convincing enough to show you're not a foreigner who can speak English poorly. You don't need to go around speaking Irish fluently in order to get the feeling you're being part of their culture and society." When I ask her if she feels she is bilingual now,

"It was never practical for me to use the Irish language, as all Irish people speak and understand English." *Nicolien Dam, Dublin*

she does respond positively: “I must say that I think my English vocabulary is fairly limited, although I have been living here for some time. I master “pub-talk” perfectly, but anything beyond that is probably out of reach for me. My accent has changed quite a lot though: I do not speak in a pure, Irish accent, it’s more of a mixture of Standard English with a hint of Irish-English. I noticed I have become rather lazy as well, when it comes to speaking English: I usually drop my t’s, and say ‘bu’ instead of ‘but’ or ‘an’ instead of ‘and’. Uttering every syllable of a sentence is not really how a native speaker would talk anyway: they usually slur a bit over the words like I do.”

The next thing I ask her is whether or not she has got difficulties speaking Dutch when she returned to her home country for a while to pick up her academic pursuits in Amsterdam, she says: “I did have some trouble switching back to Dutch. The amount of times that my mother had to correct me is unbelievable, especially in the first couple of weeks. I was constantly stumbling over Dutch idiom and vocabulary, not knowing if it’s ‘een beslissing maken’ or ‘a beslissing nemen’. In English it is “to make a decision”, so the first option seemed most logical to me. I don’t have too many difficulties with word orders and all that. Four years were clearly not long enough to affect and alter my language skills that dramatically.”

Opposing views on the same island

In conclusion, the omnipresence of the Irish language and Irishisms is in such a sharp contrast with the (almost forced) lack of it in Northern Ireland. What struck me in the interviews was that people in the Republic of Ireland were, over all, more optimistic about the future of Irish Gaelic, whereas people in Northern-Ireland saw the language more as a way to show “on which side they were on”, and had strong political connotations that discourage the use of this language, and were therefore were less optimistic: it was quite incredible how two communities could have such opposing views on the same language, on the same island! Cillian Murphy from “The Wind that Shakes The Barley”, a movie about the Civil War in Ireland, phrases the sentiments that have been very strong among Republicans in Northern Ireland up to recent times, which is: “English is the language of traitors, Irish is the language of heroes”. This ‘language of heroes’ is exactly what British authorities have seen as a threat for many centuries: discouragement of the ability to speak Irish in Northern-Ireland is everywhere around you. As the Troubles in Ireland seem to have lessened, the impact that this struggle has made on language is still as tangible and as real as ever. Will the language that does not cross the divide become extinct before the end of the twenty-first century, despite efforts from the government and the people of Ireland to keep it alive? Time will tell.

January 2009

**for privacy reasons the names of the interviewees are changed*